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The Revolt of the Women March 26

It is hard to believe today, a time when we have so many women in significant, visible, senior-level positions that there was a time when women were not in the most senior positions at the National Security Agency. Women, of course, were critical to the World War II cryptologic effort before the birth of NSA. And they were just as essential in the postwar years.

While the first senior women, among them Ann Caracristi, came from those who had served during World War II, many of the next generation of female “greats” came on just after the war (such as Juliana Mickwitz) and in the early days of NSA (such as Minnie Kenny). Caracristi and Juanita Moody served at Arlington Hall with the Army; Polly Budenbach was a civilian employee of the Navy’s OP-20-G.

In the 1960s and 1970s Caracristi, Budenbach, and Moody were sometimes called the “Big Three” or the “Troika.” All three were named as Federal Woman of the Year in 1965, 1969 and 1971 respectively. But aside from the Troika, the organization charts remained male-dominated.

The Predmore case was the first to challenge discrimination against women in promotions at NSA. When, in 1972, Renetta Predmore discovered evidence she had been denied a promotion because of her gender, she sued NSA – and won. As part of the 1976 settlement, NSA agreed to include at least one woman with equal voting rights on every NSA promotion board.

Not coincidentally, the organization that had not promoted Predmore -- G Group -- opened a study on possible discrimination against women, tasked two days after Predmore’s first complaint in October 1972. Polly Budenbach, then deputy chief of G, was in charge of the study. The group did not believe the substantial differences in promotion between men and women could be attributable in any LARGE measure to conscious or deliberate discrimination, but noted they were “far less confident on the subject of unintended attitudes and actions which can seriously impede career advancement.”

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But by 1982, six years after the Predmore settlement, only a small percentage of women managed to break the glass ceiling of GS-13, and even fewer were promoted to senior levels.



Mrs. Joanne Perriens

Joanne Bloom Perriens, or, as she preferred to be called, “Mrs. Perriens,” was part of the second generation of women to attain senior leadership ranks. Throughout her career she was a champion of all her employees, and women at NSA in particular. Her 46 years at NSA culminated with her assignment as the Chief of A Group, the organization then responsible for handling the Soviet Union and Europe.

An April 1988 report of the Special Assistant to DIRNSA (then General Odom) for EEO found that senior women, including Perriens, thought the situation for advancement of

women was “desperate. “

The report documented that women felt that they were set up to fail, and this failure would reflect on all women. Those surveyed pointed out “that while there were many ‘average’ men filling critical positions, you never found an ‘average’ woman in one.” The women also believed they were not given the positions of responsibility that lead to the power positions.

Among the recommendations of a July 1988 Interim progress report in response to the survey was to encourage women to develop an “old girl network.”

In August 1989, just days after Admiral Studeman became DIRNSA, he met with a group of senior women — you might call them an “old girl network” -- and solicited suggestions for corrective action.

“Nothing has changed much” is what the group told the admiral a few weeks later. They noted that the “road to senior executive is through effective performance as Chief at Branch, Division and or Office Staff, that open

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competition for these positions rarely happened, and that above the Alpha Plus One level men occupied every single Chief position at Headquarters and all but one in the field. “The women told Studeman: “THIS WILL NOT CHANGE UNLESS YOU MAKE IT HAPPEN”

This group of senior women set a goal for DIRNSA for the year 2000 – 11 years ahead – and the goal was that 30% of the top levels of seniors, were to be women, not 30% of all seniors.

A few weeks later, Mrs. Perriens, a member of the group, sent another memo to Studemen. She had become discouraged by the group’s discussion with him after their last memo. Her memo read:

“This matter has been talked about for many years. Pious statements of intent to improve it are legion. As you have said yourself, it’s a subject that makes your immediate subordinates very uncomfortable; they are fully sensitive to the facts of the matter and need be surveyed no more since there is no question their consciousnesses have long since been raised more than they’ve ever wanted to admit.

“I am appalled that any of your immediate subordinates should express surprise at the facts or the attitudes contained in our memo.

“The time for more talk, more studies, more temporizing, more expressions of good intentions with no meaningful follow-through is, in my judgment, long gone.

The situation did not improve fast enough for the senior women. A slightly larger group found themselves writing to the next DIRNSA, Admiral McConnell in October 1992, in what some at the time referred to as the “revolt of the women.” They told him:

“Your active leadership is key to ensuring women are fairly considered in filling (senior) positions at all levels expected to be vacated through 1994. We believe that your new Key Component Chiefs need to understand your position and that you will expect them to fill a number of senior management positions in their new structures with women and will also expect to see demonstrated progression in the course of succession planning.”

While this group did not believe women suffered from conscious, intentional discrimination, they felt that the “system and its practitioners simply did not

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identify women naturally and that the need to consider them seriously was often an afterthought. They said the situation was still unsatisfactory.

In 1992 the percentage of seniors who were women was up to 7.2% from 3.3% in 1982, but still far from the goal set for the year 2000 – at that rate the 30% goal for the most senior of the senior positions would not be met for several decades. In fact, in 2002, two years after the original deadline, only 21% of seniors were women.

Mrs. Perriens died on December 23, 2016. Her memory, and her legacy to women in the workforce, lives on.

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